In Milwaukee, Nation’s Oldest Choice Program Sees Big Growth

Enrollment in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, still the largest voucher program in the nation, grew 12 percent in 2011 after Gov. Scott Walker (R) signed legislation to expand education options for Wisconsin families.

According to a February report from the Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum (PPF), student enrollment in the MPCP increased.

MILWAUKEE, p. 6

By Rachel Sheffield

Va. Senate Postpones Tenure Reform

By Lindsey Burke

The Virginia state Senate voted 23–17 to postpone until next year a bill to replace unlimited public school teacher tenure with three-year contracts, one of Gov. Bob McDonnell’s priorities for the 2012 session.

“Today’s vote is a delay; it is not a defeat,” McDonnell (R) said in a statement. “Increased accountability in our public education system and in government in general is an idea whose time has come.”

The measure, introduced by Del. Richard Bell (R-Staunton), passed the Virginia House of Delegates in mid-February. All 20 Senate Democrats voted against its companion Senate
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California School District Officials Reject Parent Trigger Petition

By Ben Boychuk

A delano, California school district officials rejected a petition by parents to convert Desert Trails Elementary School into an independent charter under the nation’s inaugural Parent Trigger law.

The Adelanto Elementary School District board voted 5–0 in late February to deny the parents’ petition, which district Superintendent Darin Brawley said fell 16 signatures short of the 50 percent threshold required by the state’s Parent Empowerment Act.

Members of the Desert Trails Parent Union in January submitted 466 parent signatures, representing 70 percent of the 665 students enrolled in the school. District officials claimed 97 signatures were invalid or had been rescinded by parents.

Desert Trails is one of the worst-performing elementary schools in San Bernardino County and currently ranks in the bottom 10 percent of schools in the state. Parents at the school had for months attempted to work with district officials to implement changes at the school, which has been on the state’s “program improvement” list for six years.

Teacher Union Opposed

Petition supporters claimed the local Adelanto teacher union and activists from the California Teachers Association (CTA) tried to pressure parents into withdrawing their signatures.

Union members circulated fliers claiming the entire staff of Desert Trails, including the principal and teachers, would be replaced if the parents’ petition succeeded.

Desert Trails Parent Union members denied the teacher union’s claims.

“CTA is trying to disrupt the efforts of parents in order to distract from the fact that they have no argument to defend the status quo at Desert Trails,” said Melody Medrano, a member of the Desert Trails Parent Union steering committee, in a written statement. “Desert Trails is the worst school in the district, and it has been failing our children for years. Instead of productive solutions, we get harassment and intimidation.”

Melody Medrano
STEERING COMMITTEE
DESER T TRAILS PARENT UNION

Medrano added. “It’s a sad day when lies and misleading tactics prevail over the needs of children, but we know that this decision will not stand for long.”

State regulations forbid harassment, intimidation, and misinformation in signature-gathering but do not spell out penalties or any means of recourse for such cases.

Linda Serrato, communications director for Parent Revolution, a Los Angeles-based activist group that helped parents organize in Adelanto, said the parents may go to court to challenge the district’s decision.

‘Human Error’

Gloria Romero, the former state senator who authored California’s parent empowerment law in late 2009, said she commended Adelanto’s parents for presenting their case.

“The problem isn’t a flaw with the law,” Romero said, “but a flaw with the organization. This was human error, not an error in the law.”

In particular, Romero said presenting Adelanto parents with two petitions to sign was needlessly confusing and only aided those opposing the effort. One petition sought in-district autonomy for the school. The second petition, which parents ultimately submitted, would have implemented the independent charter school option.

Romero also said several of the parents’ goals, including changes in the curriculum and textbooks, could not be reached through in-district reforms.

“You cannot negotiate for something the district cannot do,” Romero said. “That’s not negotiating in good faith.”

60 Days to Fix

The district’s rejection of the petition is not the end of the line for Adelanto parents. Under regulations approved last year by the California State Board of Education, parents have 60 days to submit corrected petitions for reconsideration.

Serrato says her group hopes many of the parents who rescinded their signatures will have second thoughts.

“It’s a small, tight-knit community,” Serrato said. “They’ll go back, talk to the parents who withdrew their signatures, and try to find out what happened.”

Ben Boychuk (b.boychuk.3@gmail.com) is a policy advisor for education at The Heartland Institute and a former managing editor of School Reform News.
Obama Chops D.C. Vouchers, Ups Education Dept. Budget

By Lindsey Burke

President Barack Obama’s 2013 budget request increases the U.S. Department of Education’s budget by 3.5 percent—the largest increase of any domestic agency—to nearly $70 billion, after decades of increases in federal education funding.

Despite that increase, the administration’s budget eliminates funding for the successful D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. The proposed elimination comes on the heels of a long but successful fight to save the program by parents of the more than 1,600 low-income students currently receiving vouchers to attend a private school of choice in the nation’s capital.

“The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program has an excellent track record of success in giving underprivileged D.C. students access to a lasting, quality education,” House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) said in a statement. “While the education establishment in our country sees greater competition in our schools as a threat, in reality it can and should be a foundation for education reform. The bipartisan, grassroots coalition responsible for keeping the Opportunity Scholarship Program alive will continue speaking out, and I’ll be standing alongside them every step of the way.”

Political Football

In spring 2009, Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL) inserted language in an omnibus spending bill that restricted any new students from receiving vouchers, meaning the school scholarship program would die over time. Congress controls the program’s funding because D.C. is under its direct control.

Boehner then secured a five-year reauthorization of the voucher program during budget negotiations with Obama in spring 2011.

Now, once again, D.C. parents are on alert, as the Obama administration puts out another rhetorical marker of its position on school choice.

Virginia Walden Ford, who was instrumental in the program’s creation and implementation in 2004, notes that once again the administration is siding with teacher unions on school choice.

“It was devastating for the families to see included in the president’s 2013 budget the end of D.C. OSP funding, thus ending the program,” Walden Ford said. “Since the 2012 elections are approaching and the teachers unions contribute heavily to the campaigns of many Democrats, including the president, once again targeting the D.C. OSP is a way of placating [them].”

Graduation Rates, Achievement Rise

The D.C. OSP provides vouchers of up to $8,000 for children in grades K-8 and up to $12,000 for high school students. Congressionally mandated evaluations of the program conducted by the U.S. Department of Education show scholarship students’ academic achievement has increased, and their graduation rates have risen significantly.

Notably, 91 percent of D.C. students who used a voucher to attend private school graduated. Graduation rates in D.C. Public Schools hover around 55 percent.

Proponents also note parental satisfaction and school safety have increased for voucher students. Walden Ford says eliminating funding for the scholarships would be “heartbreaking.”

‘Educational Lifeline’

“The D.C. OSP is an educational life-
N.H. Legislators Propose Tuition Tax Credits

By Joy Pullmann

New Hampshire legislators have introduced companion bills to offer tax credits to businesses for donating to private school scholarship funds with an average scholarship at or below $2,500.

New Hampshire has no sales or income tax, so it funds education through business and property taxes. SB 372 gives businesses a 75 percent credit for donations and limits statewide deductions to $15 million in the first year of the program. New Hampshire spends $2.6 billion on education annually.

“I’d be proposing the bill anyway, but I think it has a good chance of getting through the legislature since we have a strong Republican majority,” said state Sen. Jim Forsythe (R-Strafford), a bill sponsor. “Tax credits have become relatively popular, so it’s not a high political risk for anyone. We’re hoping the governor won’t veto.”

The bill allows scholarship organizations to fund up to the total cost of any private school tuition for a student who transfers from public school, but limits the average scholarship to $2,500. Homeschool students may receive a scholarship of up to $1,500.

House Majority Leader D. J. Betten court (R-Salem), state Rep. Greg Hill (R-Northfield), and others cosponsored the companion bill, HB 1607. Both bills are in committee.

Eight states currently offer scholarship tax credits. Several more, including Virginia and Utah, are considering such legislation this spring.

Crafting a Tax Credit

The proposal’s sponsors worked with two free-market think tanks, the Cato Institute and New Hampshire-based Josiah Bartlett Center, on bill design.

“This is probably the best [school choice] bill we’ve had at any time in the past 20 years,” said Charles Arlinghaus, the Josiah Bartlett Center’s president. Although modeled on other states’ programs, the New Hampshire bills are the only ones that would allow scholarship organizations to give out one-quarter of their scholarships without regard to income level, Forsythe said. This is to cushion families who have sudden dips in income not reflected on last year’s tax statement.

Now a ‘Mainstream Issue’

The scholarship amount is relatively low, Arlinghaus said, because in New Hampshire only approximately 30 percent of a school’s funding comes from the state, and property taxes are local. Nationally, public schools average nearly half of their funding from their states.

 “[School choice] has made a transformation from ideological issue to practical issue,” Arlinghaus noted. “It’s hard to describe school choice as a new idea, given that it’s 50 or 60 years old, but ideas that never come close to passage don’t receive a lot of scrutiny and attention. As they’re coming closer to reality, a lot more people started to take a look at it and it became a mainstream issue.”

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is managing editor of School Reform News and a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.

Schools Attach ‘Fat Monitors’ to Students

By Emily Johnston

Missouri’s Parkway School District recently purchased 400 electronic devices to track 2,500 elementary students’ physical activity, first during gym classes this spring and possibly 24/7 after that.

The Polar Active monitors track a person’s heart rate, calories burned, steps taken, and even sleep patterns with a watch-like display. Physical education teachers can access online data collected from the monitors to view, analyze, and evaluate their students’ progress.

“This is another sign of public schools encroaching on the purview of the parents,” said Lisa Snell, Reason Foundation’s education research director. “The sentiments are in the right place, but it seems highly inappropriate as official school policy. It crosses the line.”

Public schools in New Jersey and New York also have put the monitors on students.

Obesity Concerns

Parkway ran a pilot program with the monitors in spring 2011, said Cathy Kelly, communications coordinator for Parkway School District. Kelly said the district decided in December 2011 to purchase more monitors, which run $90 each.

“It can help students set goals for themselves,” she said.

Parents previously reported they had not been consulted about having their children wear the monitors. After an outcry, the district decided it would implement the rest of the pro-
Common Core Disagreement Generates U.S. Rebuke

As South Carolina and Utah consider legislation to step back from Common Core education standards, citing local control concerns, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan released a statement accusing critics of promoting a “conspiracy theory.”

“The idea that the Common Core standards are nationally imposed is a conspiracy theory in search of a conspiracy,” he said.

The standards, a list of grade-level learning requirements in math and language arts, were coordinated by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers using federal funds.

“The statement was a not-so-veiled threat that South Carolina would lose out on federal grants and [chances] to receive waivers from impossible-to-satisfy NCLB requirements if it followed through with a proposal to withdraw from Common Core,” noted Jay Greene, a professor of education reform at the University of Arkansas.

“If it is purely voluntary, why the need for threats and intimidation from the education secretary?” he asked.

South Carolina’s Senate Bill 604 would block the state from implementing the standards. It is likely to stay stuck in committee this session. Utah’s Senate Education Committee approved two bills to confirm state control over using and implementing the standards.

— Staff Reports

In Milwaukee, Nation’s Oldest Choice Program Sees Big Growth

Continued from page 1

by 12 percent in 2011–12—roughly 2,200 students—over the previous school year. That was the largest expansion since 2006, and it reversed an enrollment decrease the program experienced in 2010–11.

Enrollment in the program has expanded steadily since its beginning in 1990. The MPCP was the first voucher program in the nation.

“[MPCP] started with just seven schools, and now we have 107 schools,” said Anneleise Dickman, research director at the PPF. “Over the past 10 years the number of students using vouchers has more than doubled. It was about 11,000 ten years ago, and now it’s 23,000.”

Tripling Income Eligibility

This year’s boost comes courtesy of a series of bills Walker signed in 2011. Notably, the governor nearly tripled what families could make in a year and still be eligible for the program, from 175 percent of the federal poverty level to 300 percent, said Christian D’Andrea, a Maclver Institute policy analyst. That’s from $22,350 in annual income for a family of four to approximately $67,000.

“Given that a billionaire could move to Milwaukee and draw twice as much money from taxpayers by enrolling their child in a public school, it never made sense to means-test the voucher program at such a low level,” said Matt Ladner, a senior researcher at the Foundation for Excellence in Education.

At approximately $6,400 per voucher, the MPCP costs far less than the Milwaukee public schools’ approximately $15,000 annual per-pupil expense, he noted.

“The increase in eligibility therefore represents an important step in the right direction,” Ladner said, in bringing to bear the benefits of competition on the local and generally abysmal public schools.

Erasing Caps, Penalties

The expansion also included a “once-in, always-in” provision “that will ensure that children will have access to their schools even if their parents are offered higher-paying jobs,” D’Andrea said. That was an important change so families weren’t penalized for moving up the career ladder, he said.

The program’s enrollment cap was lifted, allowing all students who qualify financially to accept vouchers. In addition, schools located outside the city of Milwaukee were made eligible to participate.

“Geographic restrictions for schools were eliminated,” D’Andrea said, “meaning that private schools outside of the city could now apply for and, if approved, accept and enroll voucher students.”

Opening to a Nearby County

The governor also approved a proposal to open a similar voucher program in Milwaukee’s neighboring Racine County, which also has dismal public schools.

The 2011–12 school year was the first for that program. Eight schools are participating, enrolling 228 students. That’s close to the program’s 250-student cap, which will be lifted in 2013.

“If the program expansion] has been great news for parents in two of Wisconsin’s lowest-performing school districts,” D’Andrea said. “Families in Milwaukee and Racine are no longer trapped within failing neighborhood schools.”

Academics Up?

PPF’s report shows mixed results on academic achievement for Milwaukee voucher students compared to local public school students.

A March 2011 study by independent evaluators at the University of Arkansas, however, revealed increased academic achievement for Milwaukee voucher students. Compared to their peers who attended four years of high school in Milwaukee public schools, those who participated in the MPCP for four years of high school graduated at significantly higher rates, 75 percent compared to 94 percent. Previous studies have found similar results since the program began.

“More students have greater options to find the school and the environment that suits their learning the best,” D’Andrea said. “It’s tough not to call that a win.”

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INTERNET INFO


Public Policy Forum research brief, February 2012: http://news.heartland.org/policy-documents/research-brief-significant-growth-school-choice
By Sally Nelson

Lawmakers in multiple states are considering legislation that would mandate holding back third-grade students who cannot pass state literacy tests.

In Colorado, Iowa, New Mexico, and Tennessee, legislatures are debating bills that would stop social promotion for third-graders. Many of these bills, like Florida’s current system, also would increase literacy funding and teaching requirements for grades K-3.

“There’s nothing more cruel to children than to promote them without the ability to do grade-level work,” said Matthew Ladner, director of policy and research at the Foundation for Excellence in Education.

Illiteracy Linked to Dropping Out

All the third-grade retention measures are part of larger reform packages lawmakers are pushing in response to dismal elementary school literacy. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported one-third of U.S. fourth-graders scored below basic reading ability in 2011.

“We must do a better job of helping children learn to read. It’s unacceptable that nearly a fourth of our third-graders are not proficient in reading,” said Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad in proposing the requirement.

A 2011 study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation links third-grade illiteracy to dropping out of high school.

“Results of a longitudinal study of nearly 4,000 students find that those who don’t read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than proficient readers,” the report said. “For the worst readers, those who couldn’t master even the basic skills by third grade, the rate is nearly six times greater.”

‘Parent Involvement Generator’

Florida education reforms from the early 2000s set the pattern for the new measures.

“The research on the policy shows that it was successful for the kids that were retained,” Ladner said. “Even more importantly, [research shows] the dramatic effect of the policy in overall literacy skills for all students.”

In 1998, Florida students had the fifth-lowest fourth-grade scores on the NAEP reading exam. By 2007, scores had rocketed to eighth-highest in the country. Overall student achievement also increased among poor, Hispanic, and black students, Ladner notes.

A key component of third-grade retention policy is how it influences parental involvement, he said. Faced with having their child repeat a grade, even formerly passive parents became involved.

“It’s a parental involvement generator,” said Ladner. “It provides accountability not just for schools but also for parents.”

Retention Policies Under Fire

Still, Florida’s policies have their critics. Some claim retention damages students’ self-esteem. Ladner, however, says promoting illiterate students is ultimately far more detrimental to self-esteem because such students cannot read difficult texts and know their future is limited.

“The status quo is a lot easier on adults. It’s easier to pass these students through. You never have to confront angry parents. You never have to tell them the bitter truth,” he said. “Let’s not fool ourselves into thinking we’re doing favors.”

Madhavi Chatterji of Columbia University disagrees, arguing the statistics presented to support third-grade retention are methodologically unsound.

“By the time those retained were in fourth grade, they were older than other kids in fourth grade. The age effect inflated test scores in the following year,” said Chatterji. “So, Florida’s reading gains ... don’t automatically mean that the package of reforms works.”

But if the age effect was responsible for Florida’s NAEP score improvement, Florida’s NAEP score would have dropped instead of soaring, because fewer older students would take the fourth grade exam since they were still in third grade, Ladner responded.

Other numbers Ladner presents also contradict Chatterji’s claims. Not only have NAEP scores increased in Florida, third-grade students score higher on the state test, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT).

“Since this policy was put in place, the percentage of students who test [the lowest possible score] on the third grade reading test dropped by 41 percent,” Ladner said. “This is a dramatic improvement. As the percentage of kids scoring so profoundly low [has dropped], so too has percentage of kids being retained. [Since the reforms were enacted] retentions dropped by 50 percent.”

Sally Nelson (sallynelson7@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.
By Joy Pullmann

Days before the Obama administration pushed for connecting every child to an e-textbook by 2017, Utah officials announced plans to release statewide open-source, digital textbooks this coming fall.

Going digital ultimately will reduce the state’s average public school textbook price from $80 to $4, said David Wiley, a Brigham Young University professor who is conducting an open-textbook pilot program. Panels of Utah teachers and professors will develop the e-books, using the CK-12 Foundation’s open-source, or non-copyrighted, textbooks as base material for sixth- through 12th-grade math, science, and language arts.

“We see [online textbooks] bringing everything the Internet can into that learning environment,” said Diana Suddreth, science, technology, engineering, and math coordinator for Utah’s Office of Education (OOE).

The digital revolution that hit the music and newspaper industries in the past decade has reached publishing. In 2011, Amazon.com announced its digital books outsold hard copies for the first time. Electronic textbooks generated approximately $267 million in sales in 2011, a 44 percent increase over 2010. Digital textbooks will provide 11 percent of textbook revenue by the end of 2012, estimates the publishing research firm Simbia Information.

Testing Open-Source in Utah

Wiley said he is consulting with several states interested in e-textbooks. This is the second year of his science e-textbook pilot, involving 22 Utah teachers and approximately 2,700 high school students.

He’s about to publish his findings, which indicate there’s no difference in student academic outcomes between hard-copy textbooks from mainstream publishers and open-source textbooks from CK-12. He acknowledges that may mean both are equally mediocre, but he notes e-textbooks’ far lower cost involves no quality decline.

“If [schools in] the state do this and bank the money they save, districts can give all students a digital device rather than depending on a grant or a one-time infusion of money,” Wiley noted. Hewlett Foundation grants have sponsored Wiley’s related work, and the OOE is funding initial textbook development, expecting significant long-term savings for itself and state schools.

Digital Logistics

Utah’s e-textbooks will be free online. The $4 covers printing costs for students who do not have computers at home. The digital books will incorporate video, audio, and interactive material such as quizzes. Individual teachers and school districts will be able to edit the textbooks to develop personalized versions.

“It’s a matter of getting our groups together, involving a large number of educators, sifting through what’s good through a writing group that will pull it all together,” Suddreth said.

Later this spring the OOE will invite Utah public schools to informational meetings to prepare for statewide implementation.

Subsidizing the Textbook Market

The increasing availability of digital textbooks raises questions about textbook subsidies, prospects for decentralizing the education industry, and content.

“The [textbook] market is fundamentally broken,” Wiley said. “The person who chooses the book is not the person who has to pay for the book ... and [college] textbook prices are counted for in federal and state loan programs. It’s like health care: As long as someone else is going to cover the cost, hospitals can just keep raising the cost. Federal and state aid subsidizes growing, out-of-control textbook costs.”

The biggest publishers in the world are education publishers—it’s a $10 billion annual industry. Three companies hold nearly 80 percent of the market. The top-grossing media companies all own lucrative education divisions that earn far more than trade presses such as Random House. Most also own testing divisions like the SAT and National Assessment of Educational Progress and flagship news companies such as The Economist and the Washington Post.

Digital Textbooks

to Arrive in Utah

Schools this Fall

Digital publishing may undercut these companies’ bottom lines by allowing states to mimic Utah and providing a wedge for smaller publishers to enter the market. However, e-textbooks offer publishers an additional source of revenue because they typically offer a one-year license, whereas hard-copy textbooks may serve classrooms for eight years or more.

Centralized Market

Dominant education publishers amass so much money partly because public school textbook markets are highly centralized. California and Texas are the country’s two biggest markets, and most publishers aim material to pass their authorization processes, said Neal Frey, president of Educational Research Analysts (ERA).

ERA is a three-person team that sifts public school textbooks full-time and routinely discovers factual errors and politically charged or lopsided material, such as giving more space to Marilyn Monroe than George Washington.

“You can find a ham sandwich in conformity with your state standards, depending on who’s doing the judging,” Frey said, chuckling.

He said a proliferation of new materials means parents and citizens who want to know what children learn in school will have to pay greater attention rather than relying on a statewide public selection process to weed out poor content.

Learning: Hard Work

Analysts such as Michael Horn of the Innosight Institute highlight the ability of new education technology to raise the level of teaching and content available to students in failing or mediocre schools. Others, however, remind policymakers technology is not an education cure-all.

“There are some basic elements of learning: concentration, hard work, the willingness to sit down and apply yourself mentally, and there are no shortcuts,” said Manhattan Institute Fellow Heather Mac Donald.

“Having an interactive screen or keyboard does not apply yourself mentally, and there are no shortcuts,” said Manhattan Institute Fellow Heather Mac Donald.

“Having an interactive screen or keyboard does not substitute for those skills. If that were the problem, we wouldn’t have been able to educate people for the last two millennia.”

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is managing editor of School Reform News and a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
Connecticut Looks to Overhaul Early Education

By Ashley Bateman

Although Connecticut funnels $224.6 million toward early childcare and preschool each year, a new study concludes the system is underfunded, disorganized, and poorly monitored.

Connecticut Voices for Children has for years published an annual report providing data on the state’s pre-K system. This year’s data showed disorganized funding streams and confusing reporting and requirements.

“There are a number of different programs that all have different provider requirements, there are multiple funding streams, and the guidelines and application varies so it’s often quite confusing for parents to navigate and requires a lot of time for providers,” said report author Sarah Esty.

Over the past decade, state dollars for pre-K more than doubled nationally to $5.1 billion. At the same time, overall enrollment rose 300,000 children to 1 million, according to the Pew Center on the States.

In 2009, states started cutting pre-K funding due to budget pressures. Nine states won a collective $500 million in Race to the Top federal grants in December 2011 for early childhood programs.

Connecticut Gov. Dan Malloy (D) called early childhood education a key priority for 2012.

Instinct to ‘Dump Money’

State-funded pre-K has laid dormant in Connecticut for at least five years because of budget concerns, said John Cattelan, director of the Connecticut Federation of Catholic School Parents.

The state early childhood director has until 2013 to come up with a set of recommendations to streamline funding, Esty said. The state is currently interviewing candidates for the position.

“There often is this instinct when you see a program like this, that is inefficient and not meeting people’s needs, to dump more money into it,” said Carrie Lukas, managing director of the Independent Women’s Forum.

“The problem is not getting children into childcare but to give families the means to keep a parent at home, or encourage a system where money follows the child. Put power in the hands of parents to choose programs that make sense for them rather than a one-size-fits-all government program.”

Targeting Resources

To make the most of funds, government should tightly target them rather than creating large programs, said Chester E. Finn Jr., president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

“Universal programs provide an unnecessary windfall for a lot of families that are otherwise doing this on their own just fine, or pretty well, and not enough for kids who really need it,” Finn said.

Early childhood subsidies displace individual preferences and arrangements such as scrimping to keep a parent home with the kids, sending them to grandma’s, or dividing childcare with friends, Lukas said.

“The fallacy is that early childhood programs lead to better education outcomes, but unfortunately there’s very little evidence that holds true,” she said.

“A lot of families make sacrifices to keep kids at home. The value a stay-at-home mom is providing is seen as less when you can put a kid in a building nine-to-five. If other people get subsidized daycare, government is picking one lifestyle choice over another.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Ariz. Addresses Online Education

By Emily Johnston

The Arizona legislature is considering bills to facilitate student access to online learning and to help virtual schools hold students to higher standards.

Senate Bills 1259 and 1255 both address important areas of need, says Jonathan Butcher, education director at the Arizona-based Goldwater Institute.

Senate Bill 1259 would have the state pay virtual schools for completion rather than enrollment. SB 1255 would establish a board to administer tests to measure students’ proficiency in online course material.

The legislation is the “type of leg-up the virtual world needs to be the most effective,” Butcher said.

In addition, SB 1463 would require virtual schools to proctor final exams in person, and HB 2260 would increase the per-student funding online schools receive.

Rapid Online Learning Growth

The bills address problem areas in online education discovered in a six-part investigative series by the Arizona Republic.

The number of online schools and districts in Arizona has increased from 14 to 66 since 2009, when the legislature removed caps on the number of online schools in the state. During the 2010–11 academic year, almost 36,000 students took one or more classes online.

Butcher said he supports innovative practices that provide a la carte education, and that online schools help increase school choice by creating innovative avenues for students to utilize several different school options simultaneously.

Several other states have lively virtual school programs—Florida has a flexible system of multiple providers, South Carolina has a statewide program, and Utah students can take virtual classes along with bricks-and-mortar schools’ classes, Butcher said.

Equitable Funding

Under SB 1259, virtual schools would receive the same per-student funding as bricks-and-mortar schools. They currently receive 5 percent less funding for full-time students, said Susan Patrick, president of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning.

“The bill would look at funding online public schools equitably and paying for student success,” she said.

But instead of receiving all funding at the beginning of each term, virtual schools would receive half the money per student after the child had taken the class for 10 days, another 35 percent of the money when the student finished the class, and the final 15 percent after the student displayed mastery of the subject, according to state Sen. Rich Crandall’s (R-Mesa) legislation.

Similar legislation worked well in Florida, Butcher said.

“We can’t forget that [virtual] schools are servicing students that no on else can accommodate,” Butcher said. This may include athletes who travel, students who have been bullied and no longer feel comfortable in a traditional classroom, or students homebound by a chronic disease or injury.

He said students need access to different types of classes to learn diverse skills for their future jobs.

“If we can’t prepare students for what work the workforce requires, other nations will get ahead of the USA,” Butcher said. “The United States can’t let a one-size-fits-all attitude get in the way of preparing kids for what lies ahead.”

Emily Johnston (ej.emily.johnston@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.

Two Voucher Expansions Pass Ga. Senate Panel

By Rachel Sheffield

The Georgia Senate Education Committee approved two bills that would broaden the state’s Special Needs Scholarship to more special-needs students, military families, and foster children.

Senate Majority Leader Chip Rogers’ (R-Woodstock) proposal, Senate Bill 87, would open the program to children who have a parent serving in the military and children in foster families.

State Rep. Rich Golick’s (R-Smyrna) House Bill 181 would revise the program requirement that says students must attend a Georgia public school the year before applying for a special-needs scholarship, instead authorizing the state Department of Education to waive that requirement upon a parent’s request. HB 181 passed the House in 2011.

“Some parents cannot take the risk of sending their child to a school that may not have the ability to attend to their child’s medical needs,” Golick said. “This change would let families take advantage of the special-needs scholarship without potentially jeopardizing their child’s health.”

The bills now stand before the Senate Rules Committee, which will decide whether they go to the full Senate for a vote.

Thousands Benefited

Georgia’s special-needs scholarship program has awarded more than 10,000 scholarships since it began in 2007. It has grown significantly every year since its first year of operation, when it awarded slightly fewer than 900 scholarships. In 2011, nearly 3,000 students benefited from a special-needs scholarship, according to the Alliance for School Choice.

Scholarship amounts for special-needs students generally ranged from $2,500 to $13,500 and averaged approximately $6,000.

Georgia also operates a tax credit scholarship, which provides tax credits to individuals and corporations that donate money to scholarship-granting nonprofits. Individuals can deduct up to $1,000 and couples up to $2,500. Last year, more than 8,000 students received a tax credit scholarship.

Because military families move so often, giving them greater latitude in choosing a fitting new school environment will help ease family stress and their adjustment to new surroundings, said Virginia Walden Ford, founder of D.C. Parents for School Choice.

“Military children should not face obstacles to a quality education,” Walden Ford said. Rogers’ proposal would “improve educational opportunities for the children of our service men and women and alleviate parents’ concerns about providing a quality education for their children regardless of where they live.”

Rachel Sheffield (rachel.sheffield@heritage.org) is an education research assistant at The Heritage Foundation.
Georgia May Let Students Bring Computers to School

By Alicia Constant

Georgia lawmakers are considering overturning a classroom technology ban to let K-12 students bring their own devices to class.

If adopted in House Bill 706, the bring-your-own-technology (BYOT) provision would allow students to bring personal laptops, tablets, and smartphones into their classrooms, potentially saving the state money and expanding students’ access to technology in school.

Some teachers and parents raised concerns about cheating, theft, and distractions such as Facebook and instant messaging, but proponents of the policy argue kids are already sneaking technology into schools anyway.

“You’re already BYOT but you won’t admit it,” Forsyth County Director of Instructional Technology Jill Hobson told a group of superintendents.

Today’s students are used to the addicting stimulation of technology, which can make the traditional tech-free classroom seem dull in comparison. So it’s no wonder many pull out their unauthorized digital devices in class. Proponents argue BYOT would harness those devices for learning.

Reducing Technology Costs

In 2010 the Georgia Department of Education spent $126.3 million on technology, and school districts spent $145 million. Some of those purchases included standard classroom equipment, such as projectors and teachers’ computers, but others included tablet, laptop, and desktop computers for students.

Classrooms currently have one computer for every three students, and 2010 replacement costs for broken or outdated devices totaled $32 million, according to the GDOE.

Under BYOT, students who opt in would bring the personal devices they already own and take responsibility for their own device costs and maintenance.

“Districts like the concept of BYOT because it can reduce the cost of providing every student with a computing device, which can be a barrier to giving students the opportunity to use twenty-first century skills during their school day,” said Georgia’s associate superintendent for instructional technology, Kathy Platt.

Privacy, Legal Concerns

Platt also noted key concerns. Some school administrators worry about installing Internet filters strong enough to prevent students from accessing explicit content at school and violating the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA).

And although 99 percent of Georgia schools have wireless Internet access, the added traffic might bog down networks because they don’t have enough bandwidth for so many devices.

Others worry about device theft or that the Internet may prove distracting. In addition, they caution, students too poor to own their own gadgets might not get the same learning opportunities as those who do.

Some incidents do show improperly implemented technology can be disastrous in schools. In 2007, Liverpool High in New York began to phase out its school-issued laptop program because students had used the school network to instant-message test answers, download pornography, and hack local Web sites. A tenth-grader circumvented the filter the school attempted to install on its network, and teachers struggled to keep their students’ attention in class.

After seven years of the program, the New York Times reported, teachers saw no improvement in student learning.

Responsible Technology Use

Successfully implementing classroom technology requires teachers to create a culture of responsible technology use, said Tom Vander Ark, chair of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning.

He cited Forsyth County, Georgia, which received a waiver of the state’s law to allow teachers to harness student devices for learning. During certain times such as tests or discussions, teachers require students to shut their laptops and set their smartphones face-down.

“Teachers need to have a plan” for implementing high-quality digital materials that align with state standards and keep students engaged, Vander Ark said. “The exciting thing is that there is an explosion in digital content, both proprietary and open.”

Digital learning tools have vast untapped potential. Teachers can amass content from different Web sources into a single lesson. Instead of assigning students 20 problems from the back of an algebra book and then manually grading them, teachers can organize a custom selection of automatically graded math learning games students can complete online at home.

“It’s time to acknowledge technology is coming to school,” Vander Ark said. “Instead of banning technology devices, such as cell phones, ... we need to make use of them.”

Alicia Constant (alicia.constant289@gmail.com) is a freelance journalist.
bill, then three Republicans in the evenly split chamber voted with them when the House bill moved to the Senate.

‘Shrill, Vehement Opposition’
“The Virginia Education Association mounted a shrill and vehement opposition to the governor’s proposal, and the voting went almost entirely along party lines,” said Don Soifer, executive vice president of the Lexington Institute. “The same legislature approved a major school reform victory with tuition tax credits.”

Virginia teachers currently receive tenure after three years of probation. The proposal would extend that probationary period to five years, after which teachers could sign a three-year contract with no option for permanent tenure.

“It’s also important to ensure teachers, like employees in any job, receive regular feedback on their performance,” said Christian Braunlich, vice president of the Thomas Jefferson Institute in Virginia.

Tools for Administrators
State Sen. Mark Obenshain (R-Harrisonburg), who introduced the Senate legislation, said the proposal was designed to benefit both children and teachers.

“In every other job, those who perform well are rewarded, and there are consequences for underperforming,” he said. “When it comes to educating our children, we shouldn’t accept a lower standard. Teachers who receive ‘unacceptable’ evaluations shouldn’t remain in the classroom. It’s not fair to our kids, and it’s not fair to other teachers who have to pick up the slack.”

Obenshain opposed the motion to postpone the bill. “If your children have a bad teacher two years in a row, they will never recover,” he said on the Senate floor. “This is about giving school administrators the tools necessary to do the job.”

Rethinking the Rules
The proposal also would have required annual teacher evaluations, tied 40 percent of a teacher’s evaluation to student performance on standardized tests, and removed last in, first out requirements.

Current policy, Braunlich said, “doesn’t serve students well, and it certainly doesn’t inspire teacher excellence. Ensuring that teacher performance is a factor in determining reductions in force is a vital part of establishing a high-quality and permanent instructional workforce.”

Soifer says additional reforms could make teacher accountability more politically palatable in the next session.

“It seems likely that if Virginia can improve its school accountability system to better include minority achievement gaps and student growth,” he said, “more lawmakers will have the confidence to pass a plan like this down the road.”

Lindsey M. Burke (lindsey.burke@heritage.org) is an education policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation.

“Teachers who receive ‘unacceptable’ evaluations shouldn’t remain in the classroom. It’s not fair to our kids, and it’s not fair to other teachers who have to pick up the slack.”

MARK OBENSHAIN
STATE SENATOR
HARRISONBURG, VIRGINIA

Continued from page 1

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Charter School Ranking Shows Improving State Laws

By Ashley Bateman

Eliminating caps on the number of schools, strengthening authorizers, and equalizing funding and facilities for charter schools caused several states to shift to the top of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools’ annual ranking in 2012.

The NAPCS judges states on laws that support charter growth and hold them accountable without stifling them.

On a scale of one to 200, the average state score was 107, a seven-point increase from 2011.

“Having school choice opportunities is a core to our reforms,” said Stephen Bowen, Maine’s education commissioner. “That means charter schools and more choices among public schools, too. The buildings and experiences have to be flexible to the needs of the kids, not the other way around. We’re going to let families, not street addresses, determine what the best learning environment is for students.”

Sixteen states had considerably improved rankings, 22 held the same placement as last year, and four were rated less effective compared to 2011.

Maine, Minnesota, Florida, New Mexico, and Massachusetts held the top five spots, while Iowa, Kansas, Alaska, Maryland, and Mississippi made up the bottom five. Nine states were not included, as they have yet to allow charter schools.

The annual report is meant to recognize strong charter school legislation and guide states looking to improve or implement such laws, said Stephanie Grisham, an NAPCS spokesperson.

Removing Limits to Growth

The NAPCS considers 20 factors when ranking states, including public charter school variety, no caps on new schools, the existence of multiple authorizers, strong accountability systems, and financially and legally autonomous schools.

Ten states either eliminated or raised caps placed on charter schools in 2011, the report said.

“There was a lot of movement last year in terms of caps,” said Alison Consoletti, vice president of research at the Center for Education Reform (CER). “In general, there tends not to be a lot of movement. States tend to move up maybe two or three spots, but there’s never a huge gain unless they really overhaul their law.”

In Michigan, a law that limited charter schools to university authorizers was lifted, and virtual charter school enrollment in Indiana and Wisconsin was made less restrictive. Legislation in North Carolina removed a 100-school cap. Illinois, Indiana, and Nevada also strengthened charter authorization by creating statewide authorizing boards.

Indiana showed the biggest improvement, moving from a 2011 ranking of 25 to the sixth spot this year. New Mexico also showed considerable improvement, moving from 20th to fourth place.

Top State: Maine

Maine jumped to the top of the rankings this year after enacting a new law to allow statewide charter boards as outlined in NAPCS model legislation. The state went from no charter law in 2011 to the highest-ranking law this year. Maine is also currently the only state that requires performance-based charter contracts.

“We’re glad that charter school organizations have recognized us for focusing on the importance of quality authorizing practices,” Bowen said.

Consoletti emphasized the importance of how a law works “on the ground.”

“Maine is a good example of something that looks good on paper, but until it’s really implemented, it’s really hard to say,” Consoletti said. “Once this law is in the hands of a local school board, once the funding is a reality, that’s when you really see if what you wrote is really working.”

Stability and Independence Key

CER, which has been publishing a charter law ranking for nearly 15 years, considers financial stability and independence key qualities to successful charter school growth within a state.

“We’ve refined our scoring to focus on four important criteria that enable a charter school to open, run independently, make sure they have proper finances and autonomy,” Consoletti said. “We’re also looking at not just how the law is written but how it’s implemented in the state.”

Ten states increased grants, loans, and guaranteed bonds for charter schools. Indiana passed a law appropriating $17 million toward the state’s charter school facilities program.

Further Improvement Expected

The NAPCS noted strong laws pending in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. CER also expects improvement in the year ahead.

“There will be some more movement this year,” Consoletti said. “Both Indiana and Illinois added an independent authorizer and charter boards or something similar. Giving applicants someplace to go aside from the school board is very important.”

Grisham said Kentucky and West Virginia are likely to pass strong laws in 2012.

“As states are watching the more established states, they’re able to watch the lessons learned and what is working, what’s not, and strengthen their laws,” Grisham said. “There is a lot of demand. We’re hoping for more passage of laws as people start to understand more about what charter schools are and what they do.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@google mail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.

Charter Law Facts

- Best five states for charter school laws: Maine, Minnesota, Florida, New Mexico, Massachusetts.
- Worst five states for charter school laws: Iowa, Kansas, Alaska, Maryland, Mississippi.
- Nine states with no charter school laws: Alabama, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia.
- States that have no caps on the number of charter schools: Alaska, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Wyoming.
‘Tim Tebow Law’ Fails to Pass in Virginia

By Cheryl K. Chumley

A bill allowing homeschool students to try out for public school athletic teams was killed by a Virginia Senate committee in March.

The measure had passed Virginia’s House of Delegates on February 9. Members voted 59–39 in favor of the bill, which was modeled on a 1996 Florida law that allowed Denver Broncos quarterback Tim Tebow, then a homeschooled student, to develop his football talent on a public school team.

Delegates who had sponsored two similar bills dropped theirs to stand behind HR 947, sponsored by Del. Robert Bell (R- Albemarle). Gov. Bob McDonnell (R) supported the bill.

“Homeschoolers pay taxes like everybody else. It’s just fair,” McDonnell said.

Eighteen states currently allow homeschoolers to try out for public school athletic teams, and 32 states allow homeschoolers some level of sports participation. Virginia has approximately 6,000 homeschooled children.

**Standards ‘Strictest in the Country’**

The Virginia High School League, Virginia Association of School Superintendents, and Virginia Education Association all publicly opposed the bill, arguing it didn’t hold homeschool students to the same standards for athletic participation as those who attend public institutions.

Public school students must take at least five courses and reach certain grade-point-averages to maintain eligibility for sports participation, opponents noted, claiming homeschool families can’t prove their classes and grades are comparable.

Virginia’s bill actually would have imposed tighter scholastic standards for homeschoolers than those required in all the other states that allow homeschool athletic participation, said Scott Woodruff, senior counsel for the Home School Legal Defense Association.

“If this were a good-faith argument, I would have expected the Virginia High School League to offer an amendment to Del. Bell’s bill that would make changes to the eligibility requirements. But they have not,” Woodruff said. “Del. Bell’s bill is the strictest in the country with respect to the length of time. Homeschoolers must prove their academic progress for two years before even trying out.”

Woodruff said HSLDA neither supported nor opposed the measure.

**Limits to Play**

Bell’s bill would have let schools assess “reasonable fees” on homeschool students “to cover the costs of participation in such interscholastic programs,” according to its text. It also would have limited homeschools to participating in programs at “the school serving the attendance zone in which such student lives,” though opponents have claimed it would have let public school coaches recruit choice players and unfairly stack their teams.

“These are all current Virginia High School League requirements,” Bell said, in an email, of his bill’s mandates. “The only ones we don’t include would be those that require the homeschooler to be a public school student.”

The bill also included a sunset provision, requiring Virginia lawmakers to revisit the program in five years. Without legislative action, the bill would have expired. And it stipulated local governments and school boards could impose their own participation rules beyond those outlined in the bill, Bell said.

**Increased Sports Competition**

Public school sports could benefit from opening their playing fields and teams to homeschool students, Woodruff said.

“Everyone plays better when they are surrounded by good competition,” he said. “If homeschoolers are allowed to try out for public school teams, it will raise the level of the competition a little bit, in the long run. This will make for more competitive sports programs in Virginia public schools, which will benefit both public school students and homeschool students.”

Homeschool sports leagues that currently exist will likely disappear if the bill becomes law, Woodruff added.

The Virginia General Assembly considered similar legislation since 2005. This year’s bill was widely seen as the best chance for passage, given the Republican Party’s domination and the governor’s support. Besides, common sense supports the idea, Woodruff said.

“Consider why we have sports programs in the first place in public schools. The premise is that we believe those programs will benefit public school students. There is no compelling reason to exclude those presumptive benefits from homeschool students,” Woodruff said.

“If sports are good for kids, why not let homeschoolers try out for the team?”

Cheryl K. Chumley (ckchumley@gmail.com) writes from Northern Virginia.
By Ashley Bateman

High-risk young men who are admitted by lottery to the schools they choose commit fewer crimes and remain in school longer, according to a new study of North Carolina students.

Author David Deming, professor of education and economics at Harvard University, studied sixth- to 11th-graders in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district who took part in school choice lotteries conducted from 2002 to 2009. He researched the social cost of various crimes and calculated the savings associated with school choice.

“We should be really excited that recent research connects expanded school choice with greater educational attainment and reduced crime,” said Patrick Wolf, endowed chair in school choice studies at the University of Arkansas. “Those are vital outcomes, both for individuals and for society.”

Deming found young African-American men from high-poverty neighborhoods, on average, committed 0.43 fewer felonies if admitted to the high school of their choice through a lottery. Deming also found high-risk high school students who lost lotteries and committed crimes were given sentences 24 months longer than their lottery-winning peers.

“The fact that these impacts are concentrated among high-risk students has important implications for the design of school-choice programs,” he wrote. “It may make sense for oversubscribed schools of choice to give preferential admission to students at greatest risk of criminal activity.”

Lowering the Crime Rate

Lottery-winning middle school students in the high-risk category did not commit fewer felonies than their peers, but they did commit fewer violent crimes. Lottery winners who went on to commit crimes were given sentences 64 percent shorter than their lottery-losing peers.

School choice students were also 18 percent more likely than those who lost the lottery to remain enrolled in school in 10th grade. “The cost of crime is a social cost, and it’s borne by society versus an individual,” Deming said. “When you’re preventing crime, you’re helping the student and helping those who would be a victim of crime.”

Behind the Numbers

Charlotte-Mecklenburg’s size, demographic diversity, and decade-long campaign to increase school choice after years of race-based busing made it a rich research environment, Deming said.

Deming determined four main reasons for crime reduction among lottery winners: incapacitation, contagion, attending a higher-quality school, and better opportunities for paid work.

When bused outside of their local school district, students are “incapacitated,” or kept off the streets, for longer periods and have less opportunity to commit crime.

As for “contagion,” “winning the lottery prevents crime by removing high-risk youth from crime-prone peers or neighborhoods,” the study reported.

Students who develop better skills have more and better job opportunities, making crime less attractive to them. That means school choice has two kinds of benefits, Deming said.

“Crime reduction has a social benefit, whereas increases in [student] earnings have a private benefit,” he noted.

Using the ‘Gold Standard’

The most important thing about the study is its “gold standard” methodology, Wolf said. The research gold standard uses random assignment to select its subjects, which eliminates outside factors from the results. The subjects of Deming’s study all wanted to attend a choice school, so “presumably all had the same expected likelihood of subsequently committing serious crimes,” Wolf explained.

“Due to that rigorous methodology, we can be confident that the opportunity to exercise school choice caused the students to commit fewer serious crimes down the road,” he said. “All other potential causes of that outcome, except for mere chance, can be ruled out. More public school choice resulted in less crime, period.”

In addition, Wolf said, Deming’s study directly links even having the opportunity for school choice with an outcome of fewer felony arrests, since students who lost the lotteries also committed fewer crimes than those who did not enter lotteries.

“We do [random assignment studies] because they give us the best possible way to study the effects of these programs,” said Marcus Winters, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.

Beyond Test Scores

Students in Deming’s study who won school choice lotteries did not have significantly better standardized test scores. His results introduce the idea that school choice benefits society beyond individual achievement.

According to research he has conducted with parent focus groups, Wolf said parents are less concerned with student test scores than personal growth.

“They think a school is working for their child if the student is doing homework, talking about school, excited to go to school in the morning, thinking about graduation and college enrollment, those types of what we might call ‘intermediate outcomes’ of attending a good school,” Wolf said.

Parents want their children to develop habits of self-discipline and perseverance, he continued, which ultimately help children succeed both in school and in life.

“It may very well be that school choice has its most dramatic effect on these character traits of children, which would explain why we’ve seen stronger and more consistent effects of choice on such outcomes as high school graduation and crime reduction and less dramatic and consistent effects of choice on standardized test scores,” Wolf said.

The Impact of School Choice

Winters said school reformers’ long-term goal is to remove lotteries from determining who receives a good education. Until then, lotteries are one way to produce positive outcomes and select fairly among the many who want it, he said.

“Schools matter,” Deming said. “Even if the child drops out a year early, the school still makes an impact.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@gmail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Illinois District Accuses Parents of Illegally Enrolling Kids in Better Public School

By Joy Pullmann

An Illinois school board backed down from legal action against two parents it accused of “illegally enrolling” their twin fifth-graders in the district though their father’s legal residence is in that district.

After three times insisting the family remove the twins and hiring a private investigator to inspect the family’s residence, the Beach Park School Board decided the children could finish fifth grade in Beach Park, but it said the family must create a “more concrete residency plan” for fall 2012.

“I am a taxpayer in Beach Park,” said Samuel Callahan, the children’s father. “It’s unfair to deny our children a quality education.”

Dividing by ZIP Code

Two cases of illegal public school enrollments received national attention in 2011. In Ohio, a jury convicted single mother Kelley Williams-Bolar of falsifying documents so her children could attend school in a better district. In Connecticut, a homeless mother was arrested for doing the same. Her case is pending.

“Once again, ZIP code has become the biggest divider in this country, preventing equal access to an education,” said Gloria Romero, a former California state Senate majority leader who successfully championed Parent Trigger legislation there. “This appears to be a national trend, accusing mothers and fathers of stealing a free education.”

Annette and Samuel Callahan are divorced and have joint custody of their children, Hannah and Josiah. Annette lives in Waukegan, Illinois, and Samuel lives in Beach Park. Both listed the twins on their leases, because the children live part-time with each parent. Since Beach Park is a higher-performing school district and Josiah had been badly bullied in Waukegan, the Callahans enrolled the children in Beach Park.

“On numerous occasions Josiah was hit, called names, and once locked in a bathroom by some other boys,” Annette Callahan recalled. “He’d walk out of school crying. Every few days there was an incident.”

‘Substandard Education’

After the Callahans enrolled in Beach Park again this school year, the district notified the family three times the children were illegally enrolled and had to be removed. The family appealed each time to the school board, requesting a hearing.

On January 9, the board deliberated behind closed doors and decided to let Hannah and Josiah finish out the school year but left the family’s options for fall 2012 uncertain.

“My children were receiving a substandard education at Waukegan schools,” Samuel Callahan said.

Students in the Waukegan School District scored in the 38th percentile in math and 40th percentile in reading compared with U.S. students as a whole on the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress, the latest available for comparison. Students in Beach Park scored in the 48th and 50th percentiles on these tests, respectively.

Annette Callahan said she became worried when her honor-roll children began scoring below state averages on state tests in Waukegan schools.

Tying Funds to the Child

“Wanting what’s best for one’s children shouldn’t be a crime,” said Kevin Chavous, chair of the Black Alliance for Educational Options. He says the core problem behind the Callahans’ difficulty is current school funding models that don’t tie education funding to each child.

“I would support [tax] money following the children to private, public, or charter schools, especially for parents that don’t live in a high-performing district,” Annette Callahan said.

Such incidents are leading many parents, particularly those with low incomes or who feel they haven’t enough control over their child’s education or enough flexibility within their local school system, to form parent unions and demand legislators offer options such as the Parent Trigger, Chavous said.

“The emergence of this parent power movement has the potential to shake the education establishment to its core,” he concluded.

“I would support [tax] money following the children to private, public, or charter schools, especially for parents that don’t live in a high-performing district.”

ANNETTE CALLAHAN PARENT

Handbook Outlines Choice Programs

A new handbook profiles the nation’s 34 school choice programs, outlining rules and regulations, statistical trends, and legal developments for each.

The 2012 ABCs of School Choice updates an annual publication from the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. It offers quick and simple stats on every voucher, education savings account, and tax credit and deduction program in the United States.

Nineteen school choice programs were enacted or expanded in 2012.

“When it comes to school choice, the tide of reform is rising,” said Robert Enlow, the foundation’s president.

The book includes an illustrated digest of statistics, reports on public opinion polls, and a list of resources and contacts for school choice advocates in every state.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of Milton Friedman’s birth. With his wife, Rose, he established the Friedman Foundation in 1996 to advance school choice.

“Most people can’t afford to pay twice for education, once in taxes and again in private school tuition,” the book notes. “School choice gives parents financial power and flexibility by letting them use public funds to send their children to the school of their choice.”

— Staff Reports

High-Profile Illegal Residence Cases

April 2011: Homeless mother in Norwalk, Connecticut is charged with larceny and conspiracy to commit larceny for enrolling her son in Norwalk Public Schools. Case pending. If convicted, Tanya McDowell could spend 20 years in prison.

January 2011: An Ohio jury convicts Kelley Williams-Bolar of falsifying documents so her children could attend better public schools. The governor later reduces her felony conviction to a misdemeanor.

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is managing editor of School Reform News and a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
Good Teachers Improve Student Achievement, Earnings, Quality of Life

By Rachel Sheffield

Just how much does teacher quality matter? Quite a bit, according to a new Harvard University study of 2.5 million kids over 20 years. The researchers, Raj Chetty and John Friedman of Harvard and John Rockoff of Columbia University, find effective teachers are linked not only to better academic outcomes for students but also to many other positive life outcomes.

“Replacing a teacher whose true [value-added] quality is in the bottom 5 percent with one of average quality would generate cumulative earnings gains of $52,000 per student, or more than $1.4 million for the average classroom,” Chetty said. “They are also less likely to have children as teenagers.”

It doesn’t stop with test scores. The study findings indicate students of better teachers “are more likely to attend college, earn higher salaries, live in better neighborhoods, and save more for retirement,” Chetty said. “They are also less likely to have children as teenagers.”

Calculating Teacher Quality

The researchers used a “value-added” approach to measure teachers’ impact on students. The study, the largest ever to use value-added ratings, defined the “value” a teacher “adds” as the average test-score gain among his or her students, controlled for differences such as family income.

The study results indicate a significant impact on student achievement. For example, when a “high value-added (top 5 percent)” teacher begins at a school, student test scores increase immediately in the grade level that teacher teaches. Even having an average teacher instead of an ineffective one makes a significant difference, the researchers found.

“This study reinforces and extends the view that the quality of teachers is extraordinarily important,” said Eric Hanushek, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. “The findings show that it really matters how good teachers are, not just in terms of achievement scores but also in terms of life outcomes.”

Education Policy Implications

“If you leave a low value-added teacher in your school for 10 years, rather than replacing him with an average teacher, you are hypothetically talking about $2.5 million in lost income [for his students],” Friedman said.

Unfortunately, the U.S. education system is not structured to ensure the best teachers land and stay in the classroom, said Matthew Ladner, research director at the Foundation for Excellence in Education.

“The findings of this study strongly reinforce the need to reform the human resource practices of our public schools,” he said. “Teachers make an enormous impact on student learning gains and long-term outcomes, but the typical American student continues to attend a school system barred from differentiating between effective and ineffective teachers.”

To ensure the best teachers fill U.S. classrooms, administrators should “make distinctions among teachers on the basis of their effectiveness,” Hanushek said. To retain the best teachers, he said, schools must reward them with greater pay and recognition and quickly remove poor teachers who damage students.

“All of this requires having a good evaluation system,” he said.

The Next Steps for Congress

With a mandate for change from the American voters, Congress now must get to work. This booklet aims to bridge the gap between campaign promises and actual governance. In a series of essays, it offers some incremental but bold proposals that would improve public policy and increase individual freedom. Here are practical, positive, forward-looking ideas to protect the environment, improve health care, enhance education, and more.

“Good public policy comes from good ideas. This guide, we believe, provides a group of them.”

– Eli Lehrer

Editor

INTERNET INFO


End of ‘Interchangeable Widgets’
The researchers set out to prove value-added assessments were worthless, Chetty said, and were surprised to find the opposite result and much more. A January report from the Gates Foundation likewise found value-added measures the most reliable method of assessing teacher quality.

Traditionally, unions have been among the greatest obstacles to such evaluation systems, objecting to policies that differentiate teacher performance. In 2011 several states, including Idaho, Indiana, New Jersey, Ohio, and Wisconsin, implemented policies to limit collective bargaining partly for this reason.

“The intellectual and moral isolation of the education unions will grow even greater if they continue to defend policies that treat teachers as interchangeable widgets rather than skilled professionals,” Ladner said.

Supporting quality teachers rewards educators and boosts the likelihood a child will have the best teacher possible, Hanushek said.

Failing to adopt policies that “ensure that all children have highly effective teachers implicitly says that student results are less important than the well-being of the adults in the schools,” Hanushek said.

Rachel Sheffield (rachel.sheffield@heritage.org) is an education research assistant at The Heritage Foundation.
In Finland, Students Win When Teachers Compete

Review by Sandra Stotsky

About four decades ago, Finland introduced major reforms to grades 1 through 12 and teacher education, with noteworthy results. In 1970, less than 10 percent of its students graduated from high school. By 2010, most graduated.

What did Finland do to achieve such a dramatic increase and become one of the highest-scoring countries on the Programme for International Student Assessment since 2000?

We can find some answers in Pasi Sahlberg’s account of the policy changes that led to these achievements, focusing on Finland’s reforms to the teaching profession.

Finns who become teachers must graduate from an academic high school (Finland also offers vocational high schools) and pass an examination to make them eligible for university admission. They must then get a place at a university (for which competition is fierce), which means they are in the top 10 percent or so of their grade 9 class (when compulsory education ends).

Those who seek to teach grades 1-6 must complete a five-year university program. Those who seek to teach grades 7-12 must complete a program lasting from five to more than seven years. Both programs include a research-based M.Ed. degree.

Rigorous Entry Requirements

One of the key elements in Finland’s educational reforms was admission to a university-based teacher training program for all teachers. The first cut for prospective elementary teachers is based on their matriculation examination scores, high school record, and relevant out-of-school activities. Top candidates then complete a written exam on assigned books on pedagogy, demonstrate social and communication skills in a role-playing activity, and explain in an interview why they want to teach.

The benefits of such a competitive process for prospective teachers are obvious. Teacher preparation programs can concentrate on instruction, curriculum, and education research because admitted students deeply understand the content of the subjects they will teach.

Because of their academic qualifications and pedagogical training, teachers can be granted a great deal of autonomy in the classroom to address the National Curriculum Framework for Basic Education, which lays out a set of general academic objectives but leaves curriculum development and textbook selection for grades 1 to 9 to schools.

Because of teachers’ academic and pedagogical qualifications, no external or national tests are needed in grades 1-9. Similarly, the teaching profession is held in high respect, and there is an extremely low attrition rate. Only 10 to 15 percent of teachers leave during the course of a career, according to Sahlberg.

Key Elements: Choice, Competition

One would never know that choice and competition were key elements in Finnish education reform by reading what teacher educators in the United States laud Finland for, to judge by the endorsements of Sahlberg’s book.

For example, in one foreword, Andy Hargreaves of Boston College’s education school claims choice and competition are not part of the Finnish education system, just equity and collaboration. Yet competition drives high school students seeking admission to a university and a teacher preparation program. And choice is pivotal for the motivation to continue secondary education (whether in a vocational or academic high school).

Our educators like the benefits of Finnish reform: teacher autonomy in grades 1–9, no external tests or test-based accountability, and a collaborative, school-level approach to curriculum. But apparently they don’t understand either the conditions that produced these benefits or that the motivational elements of choice and competition are simply in different parts of the Finnish educational system. Unlike the philosophy behind current U.S. educational policies, it seems Finnish students, not their teachers, are held accountable for their learning after grade 9.

Sahlberg emphasizes the academic requirements for admission to and exit from teacher preparation programs. And he notes teachers would find their profession less appealing if the academic bar were lowered. According to Sahlberg, an increase in intellectual demands has made elementary teaching in Finland more, not less, attractive.

Ignoring Real Lessons

So far, no U.S. education school dean or education policy maker has picked up on how Finland upgraded its teacher preparation, for elementary teachers in particular. In fact, our teacher educators go out of their way to ignore this key component of Finnish reforms.

In an Educationweek blog post on January 31, 2012, all the contributors could suggest to “Attract Top Candidates” was increased starting salary, passion, and perseverance. Yet average teaching salaries in Finland are not different from those in other major professions, although there is no single salary schedule.

Yes, there are lessons for Americans to learn from Finland’s reform efforts, but not the recommendations Sahlberg makes in his final pages, ending with an emphasis on “engagement” and “creativity” as “pointers of success” in K-12. As education policies in this country begin to aim our schools and teachers at the yellow brick road to “creativity,” a goal that can’t be measured or evaluated objectively, in addition to reducing time on academic learning, we need to ask who it really benefits. And is this how parents of low-performing students want demographic achievement gaps closed?

Sandra Stotsky is professor of education reform at the University of Arkansas, holder of the 21st Century Chair in Teacher Quality, and author of the forthcoming The Death and Resurrection of a Coherent Literature Curriculum (Rowman & Littlefield, June 2012). A much longer version of this essay will appear in the Journal of School Choice.
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